

The Maryland Plan: Building a Town/Gown Relationship on a Shared Vision of the Physical Environment

Kapila D. Silva, Peter Sadowski and Amy Watson

Abstract

A constant challenge for any university located within an urban residential enclave is to engage the neighboring community in a continuing and purposeful dialogue on how to mitigate the negative impacts and increase the positive impacts of its presence on the quality of life of that community. The Maryland Plan, a strategy resulting from a shared vision of the concerns, solutions, and needed change in the relationship between the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (UWM) and its residential neighborhood, offers some useful lessons for comparable situations of community engagement in improving town/gown relationships. By focusing initially on shared concerns about the physical environment and successfully initiating agreed upon strategies to address those concerns, UWM and its neighbors have begun to move from a historically adversarial relationship to one based on trust and cooperation.

Introduction

The benefits that a community receives from the presence of a university within its neighborhood are sometimes overshadowed by the negative impact generated from the social and physical environmental issues related to the expansion of the university and its student population. Issues of congestion, parking, noise, physical deterioration of properties, and social-behavioral nuisances are common concerns a community could face under such situations. The sheer number of interest groups involved in such situations—local residents, businesses, regulatory agencies, and elected officials, along with university administration, faculty and students—and the size of the area impacted tend to defeat efforts at community engagement and outreach. A new kind of community engagement and outreach is necessary to address these concerns. The Maryland Plan is a good example of this type of community engagement activity. It is a collaboration among the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee (UWM), neighborhood groups serving the adjacent community, the City of Milwaukee, and state

and federal representatives formed to address long-standing issues between the university and its predominantly residential neighbors. The immediately perceived issues were the noise disturbances and other nuisances from the students living off-campus and the general physical deterioration of UWM's neighborhood. UWM, the City of Milwaukee, and the neighborhood groups explored remedies for these issues over summer 2000. The Maryland Plan was developed to deal with these issues. This paper presents this still-evolving, ongoing, and highly inclusive collaborative action process and some lessons learned.

The Background

The UWM campus is located in one of the most desirable residential areas in the Milwaukee Metropolitan Area. Historically a small teaching college with a public elementary school, it grew to be the second-largest campus of the University of Wisconsin system during the late 1960s and 1970s. Each time the university expanded, neighborhood groups would join together to protest the negative impact of the expansion. Concerns always included deterioration of the quality of life in both the physical and social environments of the neighborhood due to congestion, traffic, noise, behavioral nuisance, and the growth of rental properties. Neighborhood residents had the perception that UWM was the source of these issues for decades, and they felt that the problems increased in the late 1900s.

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During the period from 1980 to 2000, there was a 30 percent increase in absentee-owned properties in the UWM neighborhood. Most of these properties were rented out to UWM students. Thus neighborhood residents claimed that this shift from predominantly owner-occupied properties to absentee-owned properties could be linked to UWM's expansion.

In the spring/summer of 2000, the neighborhood again brought these issues to the attention of the university. The neighborhood response was to set up a formal neighborhood organization, the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association, which would represent the residents who lived closest to the university and who were most affected by expansion. The university in turn invited all the interested parties, including city officials and student representatives, to

the campus to discuss the issues at a number of meetings. During the meetings, subcommittees were formed to develop, initially, short-term and, eventually, long-term collaborative solutions. The first meeting identified some immediate issues for the subcommittees to address:

1. Some UWM students who live in off-campus housing in the neighborhood continuously create disturbances for the residents, especially with late-night parties, loud music, and unacceptable behavior. Non-student residents complained that such behavior creates an unsuitable environment in this otherwise very peaceful and quiet residential neighborhood.
2. The physical condition of the neighborhood is in decline: absentee landlords own many rental properties and, as a result, general maintenance of such properties is neglected. In addition, due either to negligence or lack of time, student-tenants do not pay attention to the upkeep of the properties. Physical deterioration can be seen in some individual houses, gardens, sidewalks, pathways, and the street itself. This has created a rather unattractive environment in the neighborhood, which in turn has led to an overall negative impression of the university among the residents.

These two issues are closely correlated. Residents believed that if owners lived in the rental properties, the owners then would control the student-tenant behavior. Also, the neighborhood group thought that the physical decline of the area sends the message to students that no one is in control of the neighborhood, further intensifying the behavioral disturbances. Residents strongly felt maintaining a good physical and social environment would be beneficial to both student and non-student residents as well as to UWM's image.

Participants at the meetings identified the underlying cause of these issues as the rapid expansion of UWM's academic and research activities, which brought about an increase in its non-commuter student population over the last two decades. Both the neighborhood and UWM itself identified major impacts from this growth. Because UWM is a landlocked institution, the physical nature of the impact was severe and immediately felt. Though UWM's enrollment had not dramatically increased in the past twenty years, UWM appeared to shift from a "commuter campus" to a more traditional campus. Students wanted more of the "college experience," and the demand for on-campus and near-campus housing increased. In addition to the space required to accommodate the expansion of

academic and administrative facilities, the university was confronted with an increasing demand for university-operated housing, student life amenities, and student-oriented services. Even though the UWM student population had been over 20,000 for the past decade, university-operated housing could accommodate only 2,600 students. Most of the on-campus housing was occupied by freshmen and sophomores. Further, the university lacks a variety of housing options such as married student housing, international student housing, and graduate student housing. When compounded by the limited available land to provide additional student housing and amenities, the result was a demand for off-campus rental housing far beyond what the neighborhood could sustain or accommodate without undergoing a significant change in its character (Troost, Loehrl, and Hurtado 2002).

At least four main areas of concern are related to the physical environment of the neighborhood and of the UWM campus:

1. Space for campus expansion
2. Housing (on- and off-campus housing and stabilizing the housing stock in the vicinity)
3. Parking, transit, and accessibility
4. Quality of life (physical, social, and behavioral)

To address these issues, two subcommittees were formed: one on the issues related to housing and parking, and another on the quality of life, especially to address the issues related to student behavior in the neighborhood. Representatives from the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association were elected to chair the subcommittees and to lead the discussions to define the key concerns, prioritize the issues, suggest short-term and long-term solutions, and identify the key players for each action area.

The subcommittees felt that the sociobehavioral concerns could be effectively mitigated by a long-term strategy that would resolve the physical impact of UWM's transformation on the neighborhood. The expertise required for planning that encompassed not only the neighborhood housing stock and parking concerns, but the university premises as well, went beyond the capacity of both subcommittees. Since these issues mainly relate to the physical environment, Chancellor Nancy Zimpher directed Bob Greenstreet, dean of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning (SARUP), to develop a broad conceptual approach for those larger concerns and preliminary solutions to the immediate concerns. The Maryland Plan—named after the main thoroughfare that runs through the campus and that links the campus to the neighborhood—is the result of this outreach activity.

Maryland Plan, Phase 1: Preliminary Design Solutions

Campus Design Solutions (CDS), the design and planning outreach vehicle of UWM, developed a research team consisting mainly of faculty and students from SARUP. While working on the broader issues, the team initially met with neighbors, particularly the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association, to identify some immediate steps that would improve the physical condition of the neighborhood, increase the attractiveness of the campus, and generally improve the overall perception of the neighborhood by decreasing negative visual cues. The preliminary phase of the Maryland Plan focused on two aspects of the neighborhood—streetscape improvement and property improvement—and proposed a three-step implementation: neighborhood inventory, neighborhood survey, and design recommendations.

The first phase of the project consisted of an inventory of the condition of properties and of the streetscape in the neighborhood in order to identify the properties in decline and their problems. The CDS team conducted a neighborhood survey and prepared an inventory of streetscape and property conditions over the summer of 2000. A subcommittee on housing and parking issues of the UWM-Neighborhood collaboration developed the criteria for the inventory.

It included the streetscape condition under categories such as sidewalks, planters, curbs, streets, alleys, street furniture, lighting, and trees. The property condition included gardens and buildings. Gardens were evaluated based on the condition of pathways, fences, yards, landscaping, trash enclosures, and on-site parking lots; the criteria for buildings included the condition of façade appearance (paint, trim, and siding), porches, fenestrations, roof, exterior lighting, and garages. Additionally, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software was used to identify properties that needed improvement as well as to create the inventory database. The inventory included analyses of occupancy type, noise violation records, property violation records, and property condition and identified the properties that required immediate attention. The

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Milwaukee Police Department and the Department of Neighborhood Services of the City of Milwaukee provided the data on noise and property violations.

The neighborhood survey was carried out as a class project. Seventy undergraduate students of the Architecture and Human Behavior fall 2000 class interviewed four hundred people, including both residents in the neighborhood and students of UWM, in order to find ways of improving the physical quality of the neighborhood.

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Students surveyed the sixteen-block area located immediately south of the campus. Some of the survey questions asked the participants to evaluate the physical environment of the area using a set of parameters based on research by Jack Nasar (1998) on people's preference and perception of neighborhood appearance. Nasar's study indicated that people evaluate the sociophysical quality of the environment based on five environmental features and their degree of intensity. He

found that neighborhoods with more natural features, openness, upkeep/civility, visual order, and historical character are perceived as desirable areas to live.

The survey was used to identify the key issues the community faced and to generate design recommendations in four areas:

- Street landscaping (adding more trees and planters; adding more street furniture such as garbage cans, benches, and banners; and repairing sidewalks, curbs, and driveways)
- Street lighting (adding more lamppost, lowering the lamp height or adding an extra lamp for sidewalks, and providing more aesthetically pleasing lighting quality)
- Maintenance of properties (general repair to and maintenance of buildings and front yards)
- Street parking (locations and designs for new on-campus parking structures).

Design guidelines were prepared for the entire neighborhood. In addition to that, the CDS team developed a specific set of design

guidelines for façade improvement and streetscape improvement for a small commercial strip within the UWM neighborhood. The guidelines were developed after interviewing the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association's representatives and the Oakland Avenue Business Improvement District (BID) Board, which represented the business owners in the commercial strip. Even though the behavioral concerns were not linked to this particular area, its economic and physical revitalization was thought to be important in enhancing the quality of life in the overall neighborhood. The BID board had the financial capacity to implement a phased revitalization project of the commercial strip independently from the Maryland Plan. Even though this project was undertaken separately, it was conceived within the overarching framework of the Maryland Plan. The design guidelines for both the Maryland Plan and this commercial revitalization project were disseminated for review through a community-accessible Web site and community forums (*UWM-Neighborhood-City Working Group 2001*).

Maryland Plan, Phase 2: The Neighborhood Liaison Officer

In order to implement some of the design recommendations to address immediate concerns, ensure code enforcement, and provide design advice, creation of a partnership between the university, community, and city administration became inevitable. From June 2001 to June 2002, a graduate student from SARUP, who was a joint employee of the city and CDS, acted as a liaison between UWM and the neighborhood, both to facilitate enforcement and to promote preventive strategies. In that capacity, he worked with students, neighborhood associations, city officials, and residents to achieve the goals of the Maryland Plan through a combination of enforcement, training, and encouragement.

As an educational initiative, a tenant-training program was compiled and presented at UWM's Sandburg Residence Halls for prospective student tenants and for those students already living off-campus. This training session featured an informal overview of expectations and responsibilities of students who chose to become part of the UWM neighborhood. This session allowed students to ask questions and meet people who lived in the immediate neighborhood and who belonged to the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association. The liaison officer also attended regular neighborhood group meetings as a representative of both the university and the city.

A number of literature pieces were also compiled as an educational effort. These pieces addressed issues of tenants' rights and responsibilities, landlord rights and responsibilities and issues that those living in the neighborhood should consider as representatives of the university. These pamphlets and brochures were made available at the student union for both students' and landlords' reference; they currently are being used by the City of Milwaukee as a citywide informational tool in the effort to maintain neighborhoods.

To address issues of physical condition in the neighborhood as assessed by the Maryland Plan, the liaison officer physically monitored the neighborhood on a daily basis in an effort to abate unsightly physical conditions. Individual owners were made aware of existing and potential problems with rental and owner-occupied properties in an effort to halt physical problems before the city inspector's offices were notified. This allowed an owner to amend problems on his or her own without the city government's involvement. In most cases, when owners were made aware of concerns and given the opportunity to fix such problems, immediate action was taken toward complete abatement.

Meanwhile, the Milwaukee Police Department worked closely with UWM's police unit and the University Relations Office to mitigate some of the behavioral nuisance in the neighborhood. These activities have been well received by the neighbors, and they are thankful to see the university taking positive steps toward strengthening its ties to the neighborhood.

Maryland Plan Phase 3: Comprehensive Planning

A long-term vision and plan to deal with the issues of UWM's growth became inevitable. SARUP faculty and the CDS team developed proposals for the future of the UWM campus. The proposals included large-scale activities such as developing a high-tech corridor along the Milwaukee River that would connect UWM to neighborhoods along the river in order to improve the social, cultural, and economic life in the overall area. Smaller scale proposals included improving the social and cultural life on the campus by landscaping, addition of new facilities, renovation of existing facilities, and improving the physical environmental quality of the existing building stock. Another significant proposal identified locations for establishing UWM satellite campuses in and around Milwaukee and for developing outreach programs with various statewide private and public institutions and other colleges of the UW system. Upon

implementation, these proposals would relieve a portion of the pressure for physical space within the main campus, as well as facilitating the growth of UWM's outreach and extension programs. CDS further developed a conceptual plan on how to adapt an existing hospital facility adjacent to the campus to accommodate growing spatial needs for student services departments, an outreach division, and more on-campus housing (*Campus Design Solutions 2002*). These proposals were presented to the UW System Board of Regents in June 2002.

Meanwhile, UWM hired a planning consultancy group, SmithGroup JJR, to analyze the issues indepth, establish a working agenda for initiatives and specific action strategies accompany a neighborhood development vision, and resolve critical issues related to quality of life, housing, parking, and transit. UWM funded the consultancy, and the City of Milwaukee Department of

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Community Development agreed to manage the study. The City selected SmithGroup JJR to conduct the study due to its extensive experience in college planning. The neighborhood visioning study conducted by SmithGroup JJR built on the preliminary work of the Maryland Plan carried out by the CDS team, expanding the study to a broader geographic area. The study vision seeks to advance the UWM campus and surrounding environs as a "Great University Neighborhood," an area that exhibits certain qualities in part due to the cultural offerings of the University, and activities of the diverse groups of people that live, work, and visit within (*Troost, Loehrl, and Hurtado 2002*).

In February 2002, the consultants conducted hundreds of interviews with UWM officials, City of Milwaukee officials, and neighbors, and conducted public workshops to discern what the major issues in the UWM neighborhood were. The consultants gathered a variety of data, did some benchmarking with other public universities across the country, and developed initial recommendations that were presented to neighbors and to city, county, and UWM officials in April 2002. The rest of 2002 was spent gathering further input on these recommendations from the stakeholders involved with the study

(neighbors, five neighborhood associations, city officials, county officials, UWM administration, and UWM Student Association). In February 2003, prioritized recommendations and an approximate timeline for their implementation were provided to all parties.

Though SmithGroup JJR made the recommendations, all stakeholders evaluated them. The consultants met with city and UWM officials on a continual basis throughout the year, and held several additional public meetings to gather neighborhood input. The consultants make final decisions regarding the recommendations, but the end product will be presented to the city, county, UWM, and neighbors to work on together. The underlying notion of the entire study is "A Partnership for Change," and thus far it has been just that, and must continue to be so for the study to succeed.

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In addition to the long-term solutions recommended by CDS and SmithGroup JJR, UWM has several interim strategies for dealing with neighborhood issues. The new Neighborhood relations liaison, under the direction of the vice chancellor for university relations, has developed a plan to proactively address neighborhood concerns in the areas of neighborhood quality, parking, transit, and housing. An extensive neighborhood relations Web site, including a comprehensive housing section to encourage new and existing UWM faculty and staff to purchase homes in the university neighborhood, has been created with the goal of neighborhood stabilization. It is expected that university faculty and staff buying available properties would reduce the number of absentee landlords and rental properties, and the resulting issues (*UWM Neighborhood Relations 2002*).

A quarterly neighborhood newsletter and weekly email communication keep neighbors aware of UWM events and issues. Outreach activities/events for both neighbors and students, such as neighborhood block parties and clean-ups, are organized to promote neighborhood accord. Seminars for students currently living in residence halls and planning to move off-campus are being expanded and continued. Personal meetings by the liaison with property owners in the UWM neighborhoods have become a platform for encouraging awareness and sensitivity to neighborhood issues

and concerns. Her attendance at all neighborhood association meetings also facilitates information exchange. The liaison also constantly communicates with the Milwaukee Police Department and UWM Police to address neighborhood disturbances.

A number of activities are carried out to address the parking issues. A campus-wide advertising/public relations campaign is conducted to encourage UWM students, faculty, and staff to utilize alternative modes of transportation. Further, a neighborhood-wide publicity campaign is conducted to encourage traffic to slow down in the pedestrian-heavy UWM neighborhood. These are ongoing activities and are continually reviewed and refined at the neighborhood relation meetings.

Some Lessons Learned

There are some unresolved issues and new challenges, which are perhaps quite common in this kind of engagement processes. Neighbors continue to demand immediate and quick-fix solutions not seeing the broader and underlying issues that cause the problems. On one hand, certain solutions, the community groups advocate are clearly either beyond the ability of UWM to implement or could not be immediately implemented. On the other hand, community groups turn a blind eye to some of the inevitable solutions such as building new parking structures within the campus premises to handle the increasing demand for parking spaces. More support, patience, and active positive participation from neighborhood groups are required.

Conflict resolution is a key factor to the success of a neighborhood pilot program such as this. Both tenants and landlords need to understand what is expected of them as consumers and business owners. As discovered in the field, many cases of bad feelings were resolved cleared when both parties acknowledged an understanding of expectations and the law. Proper awareness programs, training sessions, and person-to-person discussions are critical and effective in gaining active participation in the program.

A strong sense of involvement was formed between the existing neighborhood and the university as the liaison officer attended regular neighborhood group meetings and was able to offer advice, council, and assistance in issues regarding landlord/tenant relationships and conflict resolution. It was extremely important for the both the city and the university to be represented in these meetings to show interest and concern for the conditions of the neighborhood. The neighborhood plays an important role in the establishment and enforcement of guidelines and expectations and

plays an even more important role in directing its own future as it expands.

A change of leadership within the university's department of neighborhood relations briefly stalled the entire process. One of the negative outcomes of this situation was that the position of the neighborhood liaison could not be extended to the next year due to slowed action in working out the formalities and finances involved. This was unfortunate, as the liaison had achieved tremendous success in dealing with the concerns related to the property conditions, and had gained community appreciation. The university has now established a new liaison position and brought numerous outreach divisions under the leadership of the recently established vice chancellor of university relations and communications. This division envisions offering more outreach activities and more sociocultural activities in an effort to provide positive engagement with students and community rather than answering complaints from the neighbors on behavioral disturbances. Identifying and working with the proper leadership in the community and stabilizing the leadership in both in the university and community are vital to the success of the engagement process.

CDS's involvement in the Maryland Plan is still desirable. Its resources can be useful in design and design-related research components of many of the options proposed in the comprehensive plan developed by SmithGroup JJR. CDS is in the process of building a dialogue with the various departments of the city of Milwaukee in order to understand the city's neighborhood development philosophy and to generate a participatory design strategy, which will involve the community members more in the design and planning of their surroundings.

Successful realization of the prioritized initiatives requires strong leadership acting within an established interdependent partnership. Only the concerted effort of all parties, each doing what it can within its legal authority, can bring the desired change in the neighborhood. Such cooperation is especially critical given the time required for implementing many of the initiatives and the fact that neighborhood dynamics will change over time. No single party is responsible or has financial capability to implement all of the initiatives. While an initiating party will lead most of the efforts, many actions will rely on an interdependent partnership (*Troost, Loehrl, and Hurtado 2002*).

The Maryland Plan has shown that the physical environment can be a catalyst for positive change in all realms of the quality of life, in both a university and its community. A shared vision of the

environment can become a platform for establishing a long-lasting town/gown or neighborhood/university relationship. The genuine concern and collaboration from all parties involved—the university, its students, community and the city government—is critical for success.

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About the Author

- Kapila Silva is the Design Project Manager of the Campus Design Solutions Initiative at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He did his undergraduate and graduate studies in architecture in Sri Lanka, and is currently a doctoral candidate at UWM. His focus is on environment-behavior relations in the design, preservation, and revitalization of urban and vernacular environments. Kapila has taught, researched, and practiced architecture in Sri Lanka, and thus brings a wide range of experience into the outreach projects undertaken by CDS.

- Peter Sadowski has earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Architectural Studies and is currently a graduate student, earning a Master of Architecture degree, which will be completed in the spring of 2003, both completed at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. During his academic career he served as an Advisory Council Member for Campus Design Solutions, a campus based organization serving the Milwaukee area. Professionally Peter worked as a graduate intern for the city of Milwaukee's Department of Neighborhood Services focusing on improving physical and behavioral conditions of the immediate campus area. He also served as community liaison for the surrounding neighborhoods improving campus relations. Currently he is employed as an architectural intern with The Durrant Group, where he is working to attain his professional license.

- Amy Watson is the Neighborhood Relations Liaison at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from UW-Stevens Point in 1998 with majors in Political Science, Psychology and French. As Neighborhood Relations Liaison, Watson is the center of a vast network of groups and committees, thus ensuring the lines of communication are open between the University and surrounding community. She deals mainly with quality-of-life concerns in the neighborhood including disruptive behavior, concerns about housing, parking and transit issues. She is also a key contributor and coordinator of the UWM Neighborhood Visioning Study, an urban planning study being conducted by consulting firm SmithGroup JJR. Prior to her work at UWM, Watson was Community Relations Manager for a professional sports organization. She was also a Technical Recruiter for a national consulting firm.